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SUBJECT: SOME DIGGING STILL AT GRODNO CEMETERY

REF: 04 MINSK 982

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4(B,D)
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¶1. (C) Summary: On March 13, Poloff visited the site of the controversial Grodno stadium, built on top of a Jewish cemetery. Poloff confirmed that digging continues at the site, but that it is to finish off the expansion of the stadium, rather than as part of any new project. Poloff did not see any human remains, but a foot of snow blanketed the site. The head of the local Jewish community accompanied Poloff to the stadium. He was clearly anxious about this visit, and insisted that city authorities have not broken any of their promises. While likely under pressure not to cause trouble, the local community is also more interested in finding funding to renovate their 16th century synagogue, and thereby help the living, than to continue fighting over the dead. End summary.

¶2. (C) On March 13, Poloff along with the British DCM visited the site of a former Jewish cemetery in Grodno. This cemetery made the news in 2004 because the GOB started expanding a sports stadium built atop the cemetery, in the process disturbing many human remains (reftel). Post received photos in January from an American rabbi claiming to document continued construction on the site. Embassy contacts claimed everything from a hockey stadium was being built on the cemetery (Israeli Embassy), to nothing at all was being done there (the local Jewish community).

Some Digging Continues at the Site

¶3. (C) Poloff visited the site with local Jewish community leader Mikhail Korzh. In advance of and during the visit Korzh insisted that no work was being done on site that could disturb remains. At the site itself, Poloff found that the earlier stadium expansion is continuing, with most work being done above ground, but that there are no new construction projects being undertaken. Korzh claimed he heard the stadium would be completed around 2010. Despite Korzh's denials, Poloff saw a deep trench (approximately 10 feet wide, 30 feet long and 10 feet deep) and a pile of concrete sewage pipes. Korzh admitted that last fall authorities started to dig a trench to connect the stadium expansion to sewage lines. This digging, which is likely to disturb human remains, will continue in the spring. Poloff also saw that

authorities are digging another trench, about two feet wide and four feet deep, around the perimeter of the stadium for a new fence. Poloff did not observe any other digging and did not see any human remains.

¶4. (C) Rumors that the city will build a hockey arena on the site appear untrue. There is already a hockey arena next door, which is at least ten years old. Korzh claimed that authorities plan to install a field hockey ground behind the stadium, partially on the territory of the old cemetery. However, he said the city has assured him they will only need to remove the top 30 centimeters of soil to do so, and will not disturb any remains. Once this field is complete, Korzh said the city told him there would be no other construction in the area. (Note: Poloff believes this could be true. The area around the stadium is densely developed and there is little ground left that can be disturbed.)

The City has kept all Other Promises

¶5. (C) Korzh said that local authorities have kept their promises to the local Jewish community. The city had used soil from the cemetery as fill when they built Novaya Ulitsa (New Street). Korzh said the city paid to excavate this soil, sift it for remains, and return it to the cemetery. Poloff saw this soil, which will be used as fill under a set of stairs for the stadium. Korzh also claimed the city had adequately handed over all disturbed remains to the local Jewish community for reburial, and was allowing the local community to mount a memorial plaque near the stadium honoring those buried at the site. Korzh explained that the community received donations from abroad to pay for a bronze memorial, which will be mounted on a wall about a block from the cemetery. He insisted this site is preferable to the stadium itself, as it is across the street from a hospital and so will be guarded by hospital security.

Comment

¶6. (C) Korzh clearly does not want to get into any trouble with local authorities (he now even has a Belarusian flag flying on his dashboard). He escorted Poloff to the site, but repeatedly claimed that all is well. While Poloff did notice some new digging, it was to finish off the previous stadium expansion, and not part of any new project. Korzh claimed that foreigners draw attention to this stadium project, in the process usually exaggerating the problem, as a means of fund raising for themselves. He complained that although several foreign groups have decried the desecration of the cemetery, none of them have been willing to help the local community renovate their crumbling 16th century synagogue. Korzh wished these groups would help the living, rather than fussing over the dead. Post agrees with Korzh and other local Jewish groups that this stadium expansion on the grounds of a Jewish cemetery is certainly tasteless and disrespectful, but it does not seem to be deliberate anti-Semitism.

Krol